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Oral History Interview: Homer Davis

Homer Davis

Oral History of Appalachia Project

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Lynda Ann Ewen _____ Homer H. Davis _____

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Interviewer. This is Linda Ann Ewen with the Oral History of Appalachia Program. The date is February 28, 1997, and I am interviewing Homer Davis--the Reverend Homer Davis--currently President of the Charleston area NAACP. Reverend Davis you understand and have signed a form that makes this interview part of the public domain. Is that correct?

Respondent. That is correct.

I. I would like to just start with getting some basic background about your life. When were you born?

R. I was born June 26, 1923.

I. And where?

R. In really what is now Donley Hollow in Kanawha City. Then, it was just outside of Charleston.

I. Okay. How large was your family that you grew up with?

R. I'm from a family of 4 children--2 boys, 2 girls.

I. Do you know your family history in the sense of where your folks originally came from--how they got to West Virginia and when?

R. I'm not very good on that. I only know about my family as Mountaineers--as West Virginians.

I. So they have been in West Virginia a long time?

R. Yes.

I. What did they do for a living--your parents, your grandparents, do you know?

R. I know my parents--my father--was an artisan, an interior-exterior decorator by trade. My mother never worked. She was always a homemaker. My father in his later years taught Interior Decorating at West Virginia State College until he retired.

I. Do you know what your grandparents did?

R. I don't know anything about my grandparents.

I. Okay. Is there a story behind that that you want to share? Because that is somewhat unusual.

R. Well, I knew my grandmother. My grandfather had expired when I came along. My grandmother was a great lady who was a leader of the community in Donley Hollow in Kanawha City. She was a great church woman. In fact, history has it that she started the church--she activated the church--the Baptist Church up in my area. She was highly respected, was a great lady, wrote poems, and was a speaker. She was a strong, strong woman.

I. You don't, by any chance, happen to have any of her poems.

R. I have a relative in Detroit that has some of her work, but I don't have any myself.

I. We are interested in archiving that kind of material, as well.

R. Maybe I can get it for you.

I. So you grew up in a Baptist background?

R. Well, my grandmother was Baptist, but my immediate family was always Methodist.

I. All right. Which church?

R. Simpson United Methodist Church.

I. Okay, they were members of Simpson then? Okay. Do you know the story of how they went from being Baptist to being Methodist?

R. I'm not certain about that. I think my mother went to the Methodist church because that is where my father had his membership.

I. So this was your maternal grandmother you're telling me about?

R. Yes, my maternal grandmother.

I. If we could take a moment and spend a little time with her, one of the things we want to do in the Oral History Project is collect stories about people who were, as you say, leaders but never got acknowledgement. When you say she was a community leader, what does that mean to you? What are some of the things that you associate with her doing?

R. Well, there was mainly in connection with her religion and church activity. In fact, the account of her passing is tied to it. She had a great, a huge home up in Donley Hollow, a very imposing structure, and she was the woman of the community whom everyone came for help. She retained the churches monies and kept them in her home. Our folk didn't believe in banks then, and her home caught afire and she got out but remembered the church's money was in the house, so she went back to get the church's money and was overcome by smoke, and that is the way she passed. But she was determined to get the church's money out of the house but couldn't make it out herself.

I. Was Donley Hollow at that time integrated?

R. Donley Hollow has always been integrated, but at that time the entire hollow, except for land owned by the coal companies, was owned by my grandparents. The Woods--my grandparent's family. The Woods family owned that entire hollow except for one side of what is now 57th Street, and up the hill was owned by Kanawha City Land Company. The rest of that property was Woods' property.

I. So you rented--the family rented to other people?

R. The family--no, they didn't have--it was really developed later on. There weren't many houses up there.

I. I see.

R. The few that were up there were on land sold by my grandparents to other people.

I. I see. So you grew up not in your grandmother's home but in another home?

R. Yes, another home.

I. And so, in a way you might characterize your grandparents as a black middle class family?

R. Yes.

I. And one of the things we're trying to understand in the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Gender in Appalachia is the particular characteristics that racism took in West Virginia, and the history of the interaction between black and white. So, when you say your grandparents sold the land eventually, they sold it to both black and white people?

R. Absolutely.

I. And it was historically integrated, then?

R. Yes. At the time after my grandmother's death, of course, then the land was subdivided among her children, and that is when black folk and white folk began to purchase land in Donley Hollow and build. Many of them were employees of two great glass factories--Owens Illinois and Libby Owens Ford. So it didn't matter about race. They were all trying to make it economically, and they purchased these lots from the Woods' heirs and

built homes up there. So Donley Hollow was really one of the first totally integrated neighborhoods in this Kanawha Valley.

I. As you were growing up in that area do you recollect any incidents of racial hostility? Do you have any recollection either personal or organized?

R. Not in terms of--not in those early years. I was really...I was a child growing up.

I. Which school did you go to?

R. Well, you see, we did not--I did not spend my first years of school living in that area. My father and mother lived, prior to building in Donley Hollow, which was in later years, my father and mother lived in rental property on--I don't even know how to describe where this is. It is the south side of the Kanawha River, but in the bottom land, and my sisters first went to school in Vandalia upon the hill, but we lived in the bottom just over the Patrick Street Bridge. We lived in rental property there. Then we moved to the west side by the time I started going to school, on 1st Avenue, and my first school other than just attending before I was really of age to go to school, I attended school with my sisters and brother in Vandalia School. But when I really enrolled in school, it was at Dunbar Elementary School on 1st Avenue in West Charleston.

I. And you were bussed?

R. No. I walked to school.

I. That was close enough to walk? Can we take a moment and let me just double check and see how we're doing?

I. Then you went to high school where?

R. Garnett High School.

I. Now, back to my question.

R. In between there was Boyd Junior High School on Jacob's Street, and then Garnett High School.

I. So, back to my question. Looking back at your youth, going to school, do you remember any incidents, either in the community or that you personally experienced?

R. Yes. By school age, having lived in a totally black environment for the most part, we were confined to what I would call the ghetto, really, there on the West side, and I distinctly remember that as kids that while occasionally we would play sports--unorganized sports--with white kids, our boundary was Park Avenue. We had to stay for the most part West of Park Avenue. Mind you, between Park Avenue in West Charleston and Court Street in the East end, that was all white territory. Then you had the Triangle District in the East End, which was all black, so there were pockets, and then East of that there was Wirtz Avenue. So you just had little pockets on the valley floor where black folk lived, but it was all segregated. As kids, we would play ball one day and fight the next day with the white kids if we went beyond Park Avenue. And that was just the way life was. We didn't think a lot about it because we were too young then.

I. So you do not remember any kind of organized Klan activity or cross burnings, or that kind of harassment?

R. No.

I. It was just sort of a fact of life and you knew the boundaries. Do you have any recollections of segregation in the community, the department stores, the movie theaters, etc.?

R. Yes, there was almost total segregation. As I have said on other occasions, we could not even go in the drug stores and have a soda. I didn't know what a banana split was until as a pre-teenager I went to Detroit to visit relatives. We could not--there were no swimming facilities, there was, it was just like complete segregation.

I. So the black community was not large enough in Charleston to be able to support its own drug store with its own banana splits? Is that right?

R. That came about, I guess, in my early years when two black druggists opened a drug store in the East end of Charleston, but I was a West sider.

I. So you didn't go over there?

R. Seldom got to the East end.

I. All right. And when you mentioned your grandmother not putting her money in a bank, there is some documentation that some of the ways the black community resisted was informal boycott of simply not wanting to patronize white banks. Would you say that was accurate?

R. I think that is accurate. The negative side of that is, while they sort of kept their own money, they weren't making any money.

I. They got no interest?

R. The money was not making any money.

I. At that time, you mentioned that people could work at the plant. So, I assume the plant work force was integrated.

R. The plant work force--the answer to that is yes and no. Kelly's Axe Factory was a place of employment on the West side and the glass plants on the East end, in terms of industrial plants. I don't recall many black folk working at Carbide in those years, although Carbide's presence has been here. While blacks were employed in significant numbers at these plants, they were always in the menial jobs. The total janitorial work force was black. The labor work force was partially black, so they had an integrated work force, but it was segregated in terms of opportunity.

I. At that time, did the glass plants have the union? Do you remember?

R. I don't recall. I'm sure they did.

I. And do you have any recollection of whether blacks were in the union?

R. Some blacks were in the union, some were not.

I. Were any black women employed at all in the plants?

R. Not that I know of.

I. And so did many of the women in the community work?

R. Worked as domestics most of them, yes.

I. Could you talk a little bit about that? Because there has been some research on the relationship of white families to black women and being domestics.

R. Actually, the black women working as domestic servants in middle class and wealthy households had its pluses and minuses. Frequently, in order for black families to get access to business or credit or anything like that, if the maids worked for white folk who had

some influence, that could be accomplished. I recall my dad was an independent decorator, and, of course, as a private contractor he worked for a couple of real estate companies that kept him busy. But even though he was a skilled artisan, everybody in the valley knew that when Houston Davis did work it was going to be done perfectly, when it came time for him to purchase a vehicle or something, he would have to go through his employers in order to get a vehicle purchased. He didn't have access to the banks for that kind of thing. The same is true of females who worked in the homes of white people. It was through their either respect for, if you want to call it that, or love for their maids that many things could enure to the benefit of the black community.

I. You said there were positives, and you also said there that were negatives.

R. Negatives in that black folk always had to depend on white folk to get anything. There was no creation of our own institutions, so to speak, having access to business and commerce on our own. It always had to be through some white person, and that is demeaning.

I. What year did you graduate from high school?

R. I graduated from high school in 1941.

I. So you were going through school in the 30's, which was the Depression. Just briefly, how did the Depression affect the black community, in particular, here?

R. Well, I personally cannot witness to anymore adverse effect on my family and the families in my community during the Depression than at other times because we were poor as dirt anyway. And we just had to make it the best way we could. It was a struggle,

but I don't recall that we can point to the Depression itself because we were always in depressed conditions.

I. Going to Garnett High School, could you talk a little bit about your exposure to black history, your exposure to the debates and controversies of the black community at that time? How did at this point the DuBoise-Booker T. Washington Carver issues were being hashed out?

R. First, I would say that going to the all black Garnett High School, a segregated educational system, was of tremendous value for me in forming my psyche and my whole outlook on life. Because, and incidentally, from elementary school through college, all of my education was in black institutions--black schools.

I. I want to come back to that when we come to the present because I want to have you discuss a little bit what you think has been lost in integration, but let's hold that and just focus in on what you were learning at that time.

R. What we were learning in high school dealt primarily with trying to equip us for being good citizens, trying to equip us for further educational opportunities. Not focusing so much on the black/white sort of thing because it was an all black world, so to speak. We were, here again, I think is one of the, in one sense of the word, things that crippled us in the high school years because the whole Booker T. Washington philosophy of pull yourself up by your own boot straps and not confront racism, per se, but that sort of thing, was being taught.

I. That was the sort of dominant one at that point?

R. That was the dominant.

I. So, if you were reading DuBoise, you were sort of radical?

R. That's right.

I. And were you aware of the Niagara Movement at that time?

R. No. But it was only in later years after high school and into college that people in my generation were really enlightened about the whole problem with racism in big cities in our culture.

I. But going to high school, were you taught about slavery and the Jim Crow period, and the lynching period?

R. Yes, yes. We were taught about it, but I don't recall that we really got a comprehensive understanding of what it had really meant.

I. Well, there weren't many black historians.

R. Right.

I. Other than DuBois writing. Were you aware, and I'm trying to remember Carter G. Woodson's history, at the time he was at Douglas, and then he went to Harvard, did you have any knowledge of Woodson at the time?

R. I didn't, personally. I'm sure I heard his name mentioned, but no real significance attached to it.

I. Okay. Would you call all the names of some of the teachers that you had that had a particular influence on you, and I just personally--of course, I'm biased because I'm a teacher--but I think a lot of times these people sort of have a historical significance and they are never named. Would you do that for the purpose of this tape?

R. Right. Well, let me begin with the principal of Garnett High School, Mr. J. F. J.(?) Clark, who I think positively affected everybody that came through that school. He was a fair, firm, but kind gentlemen who identified with everybody who walked through those doors. He would become your hero from the 10th grade on. You couldn't get angry with him. He was always there. He seemed to have the answer to all your problems, or the problems that the teachers had with the students. A very loving person. Then there was not the most popular English teacher, but to me the finest person who influenced my life, Mary L. Woodson. A popular English teacher was Mrs. Norman, under whom I studied, too. But I think the greater influence was by--in my life--was through Mary L. Williams, who was sort of a laid back introvert, single woman, who was very, very good at teaching English. There was Carrie B. DeHaven, who taught us Latin. I didn't learn much Latin, but I learned a lot about life from Carrie B. DeHaven--a great lady. Just a great lady. But the person that I think helped form my personality most was Lewis V. Barnes, who taught English, but he also taught drama, and he just took me under his wing as though I was his son, and through extracurricular activities spent a lot of time with him. He also exposed me to culture beyond the school setting. He was a kind of creative teacher that would pack a few of his drama students in his old raggedy Dodge automobile and drive to Columbus, Ohio, to see a live production of "Guess Who Came to Dinner" or one of the great plays of that era. And so Lewis V. Barnes was really my hero, and I guess a part of my calling to ministry rose out of my working under Lewis V. Barnes and then later Dr. Belcher at the college level. But those were my teachers that I dearly loved and that I think formed my whole personality.

I. Staying in that same period of your life, what was your relationship to the church at that time? You were going to Simpson.

R. Yes, I was a regular, consistent young person forming my faith as a youngster, influenced by both my uncle, who was a pastor during part of those years at Simpson United Methodist Church.

I. What was his name:

R. John Woods.

I. Okay, so that was on your mother's side?

R. Yes, my mother's brother. But there was also a minister at Simpson Church named Herbert Green, who was one of those unique personalities who to me made sure that our faith and our religion transcended the church building because Herbert Green was a man for the people. He was always in the community, he was always on street corners, he was in the pool halls, he was in the beer joints. He was everywhere where he could reach marginalized people and was, again, a great influence on my life because at age 12 I was drawn to the alter to accept Christ under Herbert Green, who stayed at Simpson Church approximately 8 years. And I began to sing in the choir. I was a youngster--a teenager--in the adult choir, the choir which was directed by Dr. Maude Wanzer (?) Layne, one of our great heroes, and she was the music teacher in the school system, but she was also director of the choir at Simpson United Method Church. I had a pretty good tenor voice, so she insisted that I join her choir, so I was the only teenager who along with these other adults. The choir was made up of several of our teachers in the school system, and so I was sort of

mature beyond my years because of that relationship. The church was a great part of my life, always has been.

I. You referred to it as Simpson United Methodist, and, obviously, it was not.

R. No, it was Simpson.

I. And at that time was--the conference was not integrated at that time?

R. Absolutely not.

I. Can you talk a little bit about how the church bureaucracy was organized and what your perception of that was?

R. Yes, we were a segregated conference. We were--our United Method--the Methodist Church then was what was called a central jurisdiction. It was organized based on race, rather than geography, so we were part of a conference that covered multiple states. That was a strength, just like in the school system or in the community, but it was also a weakness. For all of those years, we were able to get because of the itinerant system in the Methodist Church, we were able to get good, strong, well trained pastors for our churches, particularly for a large church like Simpson.

I. What seminary, mainly, supplied those pastors?

R. Gammon (?) was a principal seminary. Gammon in Atlanta. But there were other seminaries as the years went by, but because our appointments to the pastorates were made on the basis of four or five states, rather than just West Virginia, we were able to get good get strong pulpiteers, people like Herbert Green that was such a great influence on Simpson. That segregated structure from the standpoint of clergy leadership, was a plus. It was a minus in that we were, like in all other aspects of life, we were apart from the general

community. The total comprehensive thrust of ministry suffered. Our Christian education, our camps, our mission thrust all suffered.

I. Were your missions directed primarily to Africa then?

R. No, not really. One thing that we are proud of in the African-American tradition in the church is that we've always been among the most faithful in terms of the total ministry of the church. When I later became a District Superintendent, one of the things that I noted was that the traditional black churches were so faithful that they neglected--they were extremely faithful in terms of the connectional ministry of the church, so much so that they neglected the local church, in that we would need a roof replaced, but we would pay our apportionments, for people who understand our system. We were always 100% pay outs. We were always for supporting missions around the world, and sometimes it was to the neglect of our local needs.

I. Okay. I'm going to ask you to think back, which is very difficult to do, on your consciousness at that point. You mentioned in school you were trained to be good citizens, which, of course, meant you were taught about George Washington and democracy, and all of those things, and you were raised as a Christian, which is a loving father for all people. How, as a black person, do you remember struggling with a contradiction of your position in society in light of these things you were being taught?

I. All right, the question was as you were being educated both in the church and the schools around notions of equality and you looked out at society, where you as a black person were stigmatized as not equal, do you remember thinking about that, dealing with

anger, resisting in certain kinds of ways even though it might not have been very well formed?

R. By those years, I had become an angry young black man. With a lot of dignity, a lot of self assurance, a lot of pride, as a result of having been in really a segregated but more focused educational system, a church that was a world church coming out of the John Wesley tradition, and even learning then about Black Harry and the great black folk that were with John Wesley that nobody wanted to talk about. But with all of that in me, the opportunities for me and mine were not there, and so I became an angry young man. I distinctly remember having a struggle with the call to the ministry, but after having responded to it, with the help of my uncle, Reverend John Woods, and then learning that the system really was against me, because everybody else recognized gifts that I had, but my church didn't seem to recognize them, well I guess what was being revealed to me was that the system was still ripe with double standards. I, of course, by this time had begun to raise a family.

I. Okay. Let's back up a minute. You went from high school. When did you get married?

R. Got married right after my graduation from high school. Went in the service.

I. Oh, you went in the service right after high school. All right, let's just get a time line down here. You got married while you were in the service?

R. Got married while I was in the service.

I. Which branch?

R. The Army.

I. The Army. Did you serve during World War II?

R. Oh, yes. I served . . .

I. Okay, you were in the service when it integrated?

R. Yes. I was really involved peripherally in what I consider forced integration of the Army. We were in the trenches in France and after the Normandy invasion deep in combat . . .

I. Were you part of the Normandy invasion?

R. Yes. However, I was in the Quartermaster Corps. And General Eisenhower....

I. Black cooks, of course.

R. Yes, and all of the service support services for the Army were black folk. Our companies. But here we were about to be run out of France and that is what brought about the integration of the Army, you know.

I. No. Tell me about this. I do not--I understand this related to the civil war. I've not heard this story related to World War II.

R. What happened in World War II, we were about to be defeated, and we were running out of commissioned officers because of the number of casualties we were suffering. And that is what caused General Eisenhower to put out the Executive Order calling for blacks for combat commissions, and moving blacks from the service organizations into the other services. It was a crisis that caused that, and I was in that. I will never forget a dear friend. We were Quartermaster, and I was a non-commissioned officer, and a colleague non-commissioned officer who happened to be a college graduate--at that time I hadn't been

to college--I only had a high school education, though I had moved up to be a non-commissioned officer. And this fellow who had graduated from Talladeeka (?) College, and I can't even remember his name now, but I remember distinctly when Eisenhower put out this call, because he had a college degree, he felt that he should be an officer anyway and wasn't, and he immediately responded, was sent up, became a commissioned 2nd Lieutenant in a matter of two weeks, and in a matter of three weeks he was a corpse. Had he stayed in the comparatively safe--though we were in combat, we were far enough behind the lines that we weren't every day casualties. But there was, seizing the opportunity, the zeal to become a commissioned officer, and use his abilities and his skills and education, it didn't turn out well for him and his family. But, yes, we were a part of that. I was in . . .

I. And when you say you were part of it, do you feel like there was also pressure from below, from the black troops?

R. I was not aware of any organized pressure from the black troops. We were always complaining because we were limited to what we could do.

I. And the irony of fighting a war for democracy.

R. Yes, and I used to write to my dear wife three or four times a week and raise the question why are we over here? You know, we take prisoners every day, and we have to house them and we have to guard them, and the prisoners who don't even speak our language our more friendly to us than the white soldiers that are taking them prisoner and bringing them back to us. We related to the German prisoners much better than we related to the soldiers who were delivering them to us because they had been our oppressors all our

lives. We could find no fault. So we raised the question constantly why are we here? Why are we here? This is not our war.

I. But black combat soldiers fought very hard?

R. Very hard.

I. And so, at the same time questioning why they were there?

R. Yes, absolutely.

I. I mean that's a very deep contradiction.

R. Yes, it is.

I. So, did you serve the entire war?

R. Served until the war ended. Could not--the basis on which you were released to come home was a point system. We had more than enough points to come home, but the fact that we were service organizations, before they would allow us to come home and I could come to see a baby that I had never seen, and she was now almost 3 years old, we had to remove all of our dead soldiers from foreign soil back to--we had to move them off of German soil. So we had that repatriation work to do before we could come home and be discharged, which was another traumatic experience for me.

I. Absolutely. I'm just thinking that you were a very changed person when you came home, I'm sure.

R. Yes.

I. So you were in the Normandy Invasion, you were in France, and you were also in Germany?

R. Yes, and the war ended when we were just beyond Luxembourg, Germany. We were glad the war was over, but then we were further frustrated, you know, because you they said you can't go home. You've got to move these soldiers.

I. Now, a lot of historians have argued that the war was actually the pivotal point in terms of the civil rights movements. That the experience young black men in the service when they came home, they were changed, and they simply weren't ready to go back to Jim Crow. Would you agree with that?

R. I think there is a lot of truth to that. Whether or not it was the pivotal point, I know it was a great contributing factor in changing our whole perspectives about the term "Jim Crow society," plus the fact that I think the experience of the world emboldened angry blacks to no longer accept discrimination and segregation.

I. Speaking of Jim Crow, and I don't know what extent you had experienced in the South or in the deep South, but just based sort of your own opinion, would you say that the Jim Crow in West Virginia was similar to that of the South or in someway different?

R. I think it was in someway different. How shall I put this? Jim Crow in West Virginia was less overt than in the deeper South. In those years when I would spend summers in the South to get my training to become an ordained clergy person, I spent summers in North Carolina, segregation was more rigid, more overt, more open than in West Virginia. West Virginia was more covert. And yet, because of numbers, masses of black folk in the deeper South, their communities fared much better than communities in West Virginia.

I. Well, that is interesting. But West Virginia has always faced sort of a class question, that is, we have been poor black and white for so long. Okay. So keeping track now of the chronologically, you returned from the war, and you had started a family, and your daughter was 3 by the time you saw her?

R. Yes.

I. That must have been very frustrating.

R. Yes, it was.

I. And you then began college, or did you work for a while?

R. I worked for a while, menial jobs, but that was just a matter of months before I, under the G.I. Bill, enrolled in West Virginia State College.